

Can Those Who Are Sincere Be Wrong?

Honesty and sincerity do not guarantee that our positions and actions are right. We recognize that principle in other areas of life. Why not grabble with it in religion? We all know that it is possible for one to take the wrong medication, while believing it to be correct, and then suffer the consequences. If a person drank a glass of poison, thinking it to be water, would it not have an adverse affect upon him?

All through the Bible there are examples of those who were sincere and still in sin. To illustrate, consider the case of Abimelech who took Sara from Abraham. He said, "In the integrity of my heart and innocence of my hands I have done this" (Gen. 20:5). Yet, it was still wrong for him to take her. God told Abimelech, "Indeed you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man's wife" (v. 3). As a consequence, God "closed up all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife" (v. 18).

Do you remember the old prophet who lied to the younger one about God telling him to come back with him (1 Kings 13)? The younger prophet had been specifically warned by God who said, "You shall not eat bread, nor drink water, nor return by the same way you came" (v. 9). The older prophet "lied" to him and convinced the younger prophet that the Lord told him to bring the younger prophet home with him. So, he did what he was told. The text says the Lord allowed a lion to slay him because of his disobedience. Sincere? Yes. Honest? Absolutely. Wrong? No doubt!

More specifically, there are cases of people who were sincere and yet they were still wrong and in need of salvation. Saul of Tarsus is a case in point. Before his conversion he persecuted the church making havoc of it (Acts 8:1-3). He assisted in putting Christians in prison and voiced his opinion about some being put to death. In fact, he was so bad that he described himself as the "chief" of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15). Yet, during that time, he lived with a clear conscience (Acts 23:1). The whole time he was doing what he thought to be right. He was wrong, though sincere. He still needed to be baptized to wash away his sins (Acts 22:16).

Another case is that of Cornelius, the first Gentile convert (Acts 10). He was a good man (vv. 2, 22). He feared God, gave alms, and prayed regularly. Yet, he still had to hear the gospel by which he could be saved (Acts 10:6; 11:14). Was this notable leader sincere? No one would question that. Was he still lost and in need of salvation? He certainly was.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said that there would be some who would be surprised at the judgment day. He said, "Not everyone who says to Me, "Lord, Lord," shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?" And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness" (Matt. 7:21-23)! Their reaction shows their honesty and sincerity. Yet, these would be cast off because they work lawlessness (doing that which is not lawful).

While we do not determine what is right and wrong by whether we like the consequences, we can see something is wrong with a conclusion if its consequences contradict plain and simple passages. If we cannot conceive of sincere people being lost, then we must conclude that any who are honest and sincere cannot be lost. Who could affirm that? That would mean that sincerity is all that is essential. It wouldn't matter what you believe, practice, or teach in religion as long as you are sincere. This would mean that any Jew or Muslim who denies that Jesus is the Son of God would not be lost (even though he doesn't believe in Christ) since he is sincere. Thus, any passage demanding faith would have to be wrong! Furthermore, even an atheist would not be lost if he is honest and sincere in their conclusions. Who can accept these consequences?

- by Donnie V. Rader

Should We Answer, or Not?

*"Answer not a fool according to his folly,
lest thou also be like unto him."*

"Answer a fool according to his folly,

lest he be wise in his own conceit.” (Proverbs 26:4-5)

At first glance these two successive verses seem to be in direct contradiction with one another. But a closer examination yields important information on how we should properly deal with those who are foolishly opposing the truth.

In both verses the Hebrew verb *'anah* ('answer') is used, but in different forms. In the first verse the verb is in an imperfect form, describing an unfinished action. In essence it is telling us that we should not continuously engage a person in foolish challenges to truth. Typically, such a person will repeatedly bring up his flawed arguments. For instance, we've all suffered through Bible classes wherein an individual will bring up his 'pet' theory on some weird topic every time he has a chance to do so. He's been answered in the past, but he ignores the truth and holds tightly to his erring view. We want to offer no support to his flawed arguments, no support for his erroneous conclusions. We are to cut off such discussion.

In the second verse the verb is in an imperative form, mandating action. The gist of the command is that, while not accepting his view or repeatedly discussing it, we should powerfully answer his argument and show the absurdity of it. Having demonstrated this, it will not allow the foolish one to be wise in his own eyes. In other words, his arguments will be refuted and he will have no basis for pride or arrogance. He has been 'put in his place', so to speak.

The overall meaning is this: Don't engage such a person in endless quarreling, but definitively refute the error. Approaching it this way will both answer the error and demonstrate that, those who have been trying to teach it are not as wise as they thought they were.

Taking a stand for God's truth, and doing it in the best and most effective ways, is a difficult challenge. We should all pray, study, and apply ourselves to this vital work.

- by Greg Gwin